

Med school in line for key rural health role

Rockford Register Star

The University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford could become a national center for rural health education if Gov. Rod Blagojevich and the Legislature take steps to help secure the \$24 million project.

U.S. Rep. Don Manzullo has lined up \$1.9 million in federal funding for the effort and says he can work for an additional \$3 million if the project gets backing from state government.

But the project is not part of Blagojevich's capital expenditures budget.

Mayor Doug Scott is expected to meet with the governor today to pitch the project.

The National Center for Rural Health Professions, Education and Research would train doctors to deal with the unique health-care needs of rural people. Rural America is notoriously underserved by health professionals. **Please see 7A**

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Chuck Sweeney

Med project in jeopardy unless gov acts now

Rockford could lose an exciting, job-creating project which, if built, could make the Forest City the national center of rural health-care education. The economic bonanza for Illinois could be huge, with business spinoffs creating hundreds, maybe thousands of jobs.

But the project could die unless Gov. Rod Blagojevich acts to save this vital economic development project. Here's the deal:

The University of Illinois at Chicago wants to establish the National Center for Rural Health Professions, Education and Research at its College of Medicine at Rockford.

DEAN BERNARD SALAFSKY says it's a \$24 million project that will put Illinois and Rockford on the world medical map. Located on the medical school's Parkview campus, the center will train doctors and other medical professionals in the unique health-care needs of rural people in Illinois, the United States at large and, ultimately, the world.

"This center is unique," Salafsky said. "No one else is tending to these rural health-care issues." The vast majority of Illinois' 102 counties lack adequate medical service. Salafsky believes this project could be a powerful tool to revitalize rural Illinois and other states.

The feds are on board. U.S. Rep. Don Manzullo, R-Egan, has garnered \$1.9 million so far, and the university has asked him for an additional \$3 million. Manzullo wants to do that. But he needs to know whether the state will ante up some money.

That's a big problem. Rockford's project did not appear in the state's 2005 capital budget released last week. It didn't make the university system's top 10 list of work-to-do projects, said Randy Kangus, the U of I's assistant vice president for planning and budgeting.

"We're heavily weighted toward repair and renovation of old buildings" at the university's Chicago, Springfield and Champaign-Urbana campuses, he said. The governor's budget contains just \$10.7 million for university capital projects, said Tom Hardy, the U of I's chief spokesman. Hardy said that "some have suggested" that Rockford's project might have a better chance of funding under Blagojevich's Opportunity Returns economic development program.

"The project has the full support of senior campus and university administration. The university is going through with a fund-raising initiative to raise private dollars, and we are working with Congressman Manzullo on raising federal funds," Hardy said.

THE PROBABLE FUNDING mix: \$5 million from the U.S. government, \$12 million from the state and \$7 million from fund raising targeted at agribusiness firms.

"Obviously, if Rockford-area legislators wanted to mount an effort to bring additional state funds to this project, the university would support that," Hardy said. Lawmakers are doing that. Rep. Dave Winters, R-Shirland, and other area legislators meet today with university officials to stress the project's importance.

I asked John Strandin, Mayor Doug Scott's spokesman, if the mayor would be at the meeting. "He wasn't invited," Strandin said. Just my opinion, I said, but the city's chief elected official does not need an invitation.

"It's not on his schedule," Strandin replied, adding that Scott has written and talked to the governor recently about the project.

A few minutes later, Strandin phoned to say Scott will meet with the governor today about the medical school project. Blagojevich is coming to a Rockford Walgreen's to talk about a buying club that can help lower prescription drug prices.

Welcome to Rockford, governor. Save this vital project, please.

Call Chuck Sweeney at 815-987-1372 or e-mail csweeney@registerstartower.com.